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SUBJECT: FIXER, HATCHETMAN, JAILBIRD, STATESMAN: FOUR CONVERSATIONS WITH IDRISSE SECK

REF: 05 DAKAR 02509

DAKAR 00002479 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Political Counselor Roy L. Whitaker for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Ex-Prime Minister Idrissa Seck, Abdoulaye Wade's "spiritual son" and strategist until he fired and jailed him, is testing popular support for his presidential bid in a pre-campaign tour of the regions. We had no direct contact with Seck since April 2004, but in the last three weeks we have had several chance encounters and a formal meeting to brief him on the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA). Seck trusts but will verify Senegal's electoral process; plans to win the February election in part by cutting into Wade's religious support; wants a presidential cabinet with strong and independent ministers; questions Wade's MCA priorities; and believes national economic development should begin by rebuilding and reintegrating the Casamance. END SUMMARY.

JUST LISTENIN', NOT CAMPAIGNIN'

¶2. (C) Since formal campaigning for the February 25 presidential and parliamentary elections is limited to less than a month, Seck will crisscross the country to "test people's priorities" and build his political organization. Only three days after coming back from several months in Paris, he headed south for a week's stay in the still war-weary Casamance. Wade loyalists in Ziguinchor gave him "48 hours to leave," and forbade him to go to outlying towns. He riposted by publicly holding the state responsible for his safety, but said he would also take appropriate measures, meaning his platoon of beefy and efficient bodyguards. Seck ended up going where he wanted, and spent evenings and Sunday morning lounging at a riverside hotel where our traveling Political Counselor, Defense Attaché and Senegalese political specialist ran into him.

I'LL APPOINT MINISTERS WITH FULL ROLODEXES!

¶3. (C) At an impromptu September 29 post-dinner dockside chat on the Casamance River, Seck voiced ongoing affection for his old mentor. Wade was "well-intentioned in the beginning," a true representative of the generation that fought for independence and laid a basis for a proud and sovereign Senegal. Unfortunately, after building some basic infrastructure, Wade and his contemporaries have turned into "talkers rather than doers," incapable of modern leadership in a sophisticated world marketplace. Wade is erratic by nature, especially as he grows older, but he also hurt himself by choosing terrible staff, rejecting dissenting

opinions, listening to self-interested pressure from his family -- and especially from son Karim. He has, quite simply, lost sight of people's needs and created a "crisis of confidence."

¶4. (C) Seck told us his polls showed he had the best chance to defeat Wade at elections. A coalition would be necessary to beat Wade in the run-off (if there is one), but as both agent of the new generation and reformer, he shares goals and methods with Socialist Party leader Tanor Dieng: "I get along with Tanor." His policy priorities will be health, good governance and fair distribution of resources. For the young urban poor, he will take his slogan from hip hop music: "Idy job et chop!" or "Idy for jobs and food."

¶5. (C) Wade thinks he can buy unconditional support from locally powerful marabouts, but he is wrong. Seck's own Tidjane Brotherhood is alienated by Wade's public genuflection to the rival Mouride Brotherhood Khalif, and Wade's attempts to curry the favor of militia-backed Islamic activists (Moustarchidines, Kara MBacke, Bethio Thioune) is simple "political-religious commerce." As for Wade's Mourides, it is true the Khalif "always formally backs the incumbent, but he sometimes gives underground instructions." (A week later, events seemed to prove Seck right when the Khalif's son received him warmly in the Mouride capital of Touba and declared "all those who have betrayed the founder of Mouridism will lose power.")

¶6. (C) Somewhat surprisingly, given the cynicism we have heard from his allies and staff, Seck on September 29 voiced full confidence in the electoral system which, "despite problems, will work fairly." It is true, though, that the new electoral system and voter registration list may not be "operational" in time, and it may therefore be necessary to retain the current voter list. The key to fair elections and vote counts will be to have electoral watchdogs on the

DAKAR 00002479 002.2 OF 003

ground. Nationwide, Seck has "identified 40,000 poll watchers from all segments of society," whom he is equipping with cell phones that can photograph and document any fraud. He will receive election results "live," as polling stations close, and be able instantly to judge the degree of fraud. "If it's in the one or two percent range, we'll probably tolerate it ... but beyond that, we'll oppose the coup de force."

¶7. (C) Seck said he is committed to being president. If he loses in 2007, he'll run again in 2012, and in 2017, and in 2022, at which time he will retire as a candidate. He expects, though, to win in 2007, and his first priority will be to end the drift, indecision, incompetence and isolation he sees in Wade's cabinet. He wants strong, independent ministers who will be able to challenge the president's judgments and who bring to government more than they expect to gain from it: "I'll want people who know how to network internationally, people with bulging carnets d'adresses (rolodexes)."

THE CASAMANCE: THE PEACE PROCESS

¶8. (C) In a second impromptu chat, a hot and lazy late Sunday morning on the balcony of Ziguinchor's riverside hotel, Seck told the Political Counselor he had purposely taken the overnight boat from Dakar, the "Willis," to talk with ordinary Casamancais. Young men and women, he said, have impressed upon him that they were returning from Dakar as new university graduates or with technical or commercial skills, but that their prospects in the Casamance are nil. They are demanding Dakar share resources and invest in the South. Some had spoken to him of cousins who, despite the peace process, were turning to the rebellion for jobs. Rebel recalcitrant Salif Sadio was said to be offering a kind of franchise deal: his group would feed and lodge a new rebel for several weeks while he figured out how to live off the

land. That, Seck stressed, cannot be allowed to continue, and he is talking to younger leaders of the rebellion's political wing to seek solutions.

¶19. (C) The Casamance must, Seck went on, be linked by reliable transportation routes to the north; Ziguinchor must be made into a transit and commercial center, and already pacified towns and villages must be developed even in the absence of a definitive peace pact. These areas of renewed economic activity will in time spread outward and attract rebels back from the bush. The first step is to obtain at least two more boats, and they must, unlike the Willis, be capable of carrying freight. Second, real and unwavering diplomatic pressure must be put on The Gambia to finally allow construction of a bridge across the Gambia River. Third, the Casamance River has to be dredged and the Ziguinchor port modernized to compete with Banjul as a transshipment point for trade from Mauritania, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea and even Mali's overland commerce. His policy as Prime Minister had been to develop Senegal "one or two cities at a time," and as president, he would urge donors to redirect assistance first to Ziguinchor.

THE CASAMANCE: DEMINING

¶110. (C) The Defense Attaché joined the conversation at this point, and Seck initiated a separate discussion of mine removal, which he sees as a key component to the peace process and reconstruction. He asked the nature of U.S. involvement in demining, and we explained the distinction between operational and humanitarian demining. He asked to what degree the U.S. was involved, and we told him the U.S. had donated USD 96 thousand in FY06 monies via Handicapped International for two humanitarian demining activities: Mine Risk Education and Victims Assistance. He stressed that Casamancais need to see mines being taken out of the ground and to enjoy the economic benefits of mine-free orchards and farm roads. We said there has been some progress, including the August signing of a decree creating a National Mine Action Commission and calling for a National Mine Action Center in Ziguinchor, but that we also need a signed peace accord.

¶11. (C) Seck objected that he sees no need for a formal peace agreement; what is urgent is actively building and expanding economic opportunity, which in turn would lead to peace. He cited countries, including Cambodia and Bosnia, where demining had been undertaken wherever security allowed it. Why should Senegal, he asked, be any different? Finally, he asked for a detailed and if possible authoritative map of the areas where mines had been laid. We referred him to Handicap International, and two weeks later

DAKAR 00002479 003.2 OF 003

delivered to him the HI materials and maps. While grateful for the information, he both voiced and showed disappointment to learn that demining must follow a formal peace pact, and that the actual demining process could take several years.

MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE ACCOUNT

¶112. (C) Charge, Economic and Political Counselors called on Seck October 11 at his Dakar home to brief on the Millennium Challenge Account. He had by that time finished his Casamance tour and delayed a visit to the North amidst reports that the ruling Senegalese Democratic Party was organizing to disrupt his trip. He was also coping with a finding by the Prime Minister and Interior Minister that Seck could not use the name "Rewmi" or "the country" for his new political party, a name chosen, our Senegalese Political Assistant assures us, because it is charged with emotion, patriotism and a sense of care for the common good. Freedom of movement is essential to a democracy, he fumed; he will continue his fact-finding travels and will counter, though he will not initiate, any violence. His affection for Wade seems to be fading: "Wade is the author of attacks on my home

(in 2005), and of the beating of (another young political activist) Talla Sylla." The latest threats are being made, he argued, because the Government is "aware of the political facts on the ground," which do not favor Wade.

¶13. (C) The Princeton econometrics-educated Seck then turned to the MCA, and showed he was well briefed both in general and on Senegal's project proposal in particular. He questioned Wade's ability and willingness to be a productive and accountable partner, and voiced concern over the process of displacing tenants at the site, land ownership transparency, and the possibility of open and competitive tendering for managing partners, suppliers and construction firms. He questioned whether the project's profitability and economic growth potential could meet expectations.

¶14. (C) Seck asked whether the current project at Diamniadio is the best use of a significant level of development assistance. There may be a disconnect, he suggested, between current U.S. aid programs of about USD 55 million for the entire country, and a projected investment of USD 500 million for a single project. He said the site is essentially a "Dakar project," since Dakar would grow to encompass it within 25 years. Further, the project would draw even more migrants from the Casamance and further deepen its brain drain and economic woes. The Charge stressed that the MCA project included multiple provisions to assure accountability and transparency, and that Diamniadio could significantly enhance economic growth and reduce poverty, but Seck recommended instead investment in the Casamance.

COMMENT

¶15. (C) Seck remains as determined as ever to be president, and he sees his informal national surveys and enthusiastic reception in the Casamance as proof that he has a chance to finish first or second in the election's initial round. Further, he sees himself as the advance guard of a reform generation that includes Socialist Party leader and fellow reformer Tanor Dieng, and hints strongly that they can form the nucleus of a coalition that will beat Wade in the run-off. He also says he wants this election, unlike most in Senegal, to turn on issues rather than personalities.

¶16. (C) Even his enemies concede that Seck has a "deeply structured and disciplined mind" (reftel). He is a focused workhorse, who is deeply religious (to the point that his citing of the Koran in times of distress annoys even some moderate Muslims), and, as his long-time service to Wade shows, has an instinct for both the groin and the jugular. What he has never demonstrated is the charisma to bring crowds along with him. Whether by calculation or by chance, he has timed his return from Paris well: a population exhausted by energy shortages, joblessness, proof of judicial corruption, teacher and student discontent in schools and university, chaotic traffic, and a general impression of executive mismanagement, are receptive to calls for change.

END COMMENT.

JACKSON